DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 441 436 IR 057 707

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TITLE Forming a New Information Services Section: A Case Study--Parliament of the Republic of South Africa.

PUB DATE 1999-08-00

NOTE 6p.; In: IFLA Council and General Conference. Conference Programme and Proceedings (65th, Bangkok, Thailand, August 20-28, 1999); see IR 057 674.

AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla65/papers/146-69e.htm

PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Access to Information; Case Studies; Foreign Countries; Government (Administrative Body); *Government Libraries; Information Processing; *Information Services; Information Technology; Legislators; *Library Development; *Organizational Development; Research; Users (Information)

IDENTIFIERS *Parliamentary Libraries; South Africa

ABSTRACT

The South African Library of Parliament and Research unit has devoted considerable time and money to improving its research and library services for members, committees, and management of Parliament. The Library and Research Units have recently re-structured and re-designed services and information products, engaging in collection development policy, stock-taking and weeding, upgrade of the information technology infrastructure, and changes of the organizational structure to reflect the newly formed Information Services Section (ISS). The aim was to create an ISS that will facilitate the work of members, committees, and management of Parliament by gathering, analyzing, and disseminating relevant information in a non-partisan, easily accessible, and understandable format. This paper presents a case study of the formation of the ISS. Topics covered include historical background, unified information service, information processing, the benefits of parliamentary information service, and information technology. (Author/MES)

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ED 441 436

IFLANET
International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions
Search Contacts
Annual Conference

65th IFLA Council and General Conference

Bangkok, Thailand, August 20 - August 28, 1999

Conference Proceedings

Code Number: 146-69E
Division Number: I
Professional Group: Library and Research Services for Parliaments
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 69
Simultaneous Interpretation: *No*

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Forming a new Information Services Section: A Case Study - Parliament of the Republic of South Africa

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Abstract

The South African Library of Parliament and Research unit have, in the last 15 months devoted considerable time and money to improving their research and library services for Members, Committees and management of Parliament. The Library and Research Units have recently re-structured and re-designed services and information products, engaging in collection development policy, stock-taking and weeding, upgrade of the information technology infrastructure and changing the organisational structure to reflect the newly formed Information Services Section (ISS).

The aim of this exercise was to create an ISS that will facilitate the work of Members, Committees and management of Parliament by gathering, analysing and disseminating relevant information in a non-partisan, easily accessible and understandable format.

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Paper

Historical Background

The Library of Parliament of the Republic of South Africa was establish in 1884 and is housed in Parliament House at Cape Town. The Research as distinct from the Library came into existence in 1997 and is housed at REGIS House outside the Parliament. Prior to 1997,

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Parliament was utilising the services of the Institute for Futures Research of the University of Stellenbosch. The Library was the channel through which research information was made available to Mmembers.

In 1995, the Speaker of the House requested a parastatal research organisation to assess the situation in Parliament and make appropriate recommendations. The request was specific to the need for communication links, access to local and international information and electronic forums. In the same year, the Speaker appointed a committee to advise her on a logical structure for the administration of Parliament based on its actual support services requirements.

In order for the Committee to determine what support services were required by Parliament the core functions were determined, the tasks that Members are required to perform in order to participate in the execution of the functions of Parliament were extrapolated. The Committee then submitted a report which on the basis of the identified core services required for the administration of Parliament recommended guiding principles and practices for the organisation of these services into functional units. The report also presented a draft overall operational component structure within which these units should be managed. The amalgamation of the Library and Research Units into Information Services is a result of this process.

A Unified Information Service

Although library and research work differs in the degree to which information is processed, both serve the same clients and make use of similar resources. In the interests of cost-effectiveness and providing a unified and integrated "one-stop shop" service to clients, the basic concept would be that the library and research units should operate as a single section sharing not only much of the same physical resources, but also personnel resources. The idea is to establish a parliamentary service that would be a reliable port of call for all the research and information needs of all Members of Parliament, Parliamentary Committees and senior management. The need for a seamless information service and the significant overlap and synergy in the work of librarians and researchers, strongly supports that they are organisationally and functionally linked under the umbrella of a single section. The benefits of this approach to serving the information and research needs of Members, Committees and management of Parliament are:

Clients deal with a single entity for all their information needs. After making a request at a single point, ensuring that the appropriate staff process the request is the responsibility of the integrated information service and not the client. Promotion of an inter-disciplinary approach to developing the most appropriate response for the client.

On an operational level, the information services section will contain various functional groups. The boundaries between the different groups would be fluid to allow for the optimal use of resources and substantive experience. This arrangement would also promote and facilitate an inter-disciplinary and integrated approach to information requests. The management of the different groups will be such that staff from different groups may work jointly in responding to research requests i.e. small "teams" comprising reference/subject librarians and researchers working together as information specialists to compile the most suitable and comprehensive product that is tailored to the specific needs of the individual Member, Committee or manager. Staff may operate individually to address uncomplicated/simple requests from clients.

Generally, Parliamentary Research and Information Services are structured on the basis of broad subject-area specialisation and functional sub-sections within the various aspects of research and library science. In keeping with international best practice and taking into account the peculiarities and specific needs within the South African context, a proposed structure and organogram for a unified Information Services Section is presented in Figure 2.

While the divisions into subject areas and essential services are necessary on an operational level to facilitate the efficient management and passage of work through the section, where personnel are concerned, these represent superficial boundaries. Researchers and reference/subject librarians will work together to address the needs of the clients. This will include both subject-specific and general research and information needs.

The Section Manager, together with the two assistant managers (Information Manager: Research & Information Manager: Library) will take responsibility for internal policy matters and the day-to-day operations of the section. The assistant managers will also be responsible for the co-ordination of work amongst staff and the maintenance of high quality output and delivery of services.[See figure 2]

The Section has 22 Librarians, 12 Researchers and 22 support staff. The staff are given maximum opportunity to develop, progress and transfer to other units within the organisational structure. Functional units are strucutred to execute work smoothly and timeously. The organisational structure locate elements of a single function within a single functional unit and we also try to minimize number of levels and hierarchies.

Information Processing

To facilitate the operational management of work the information-processing component will consist of clusters of subjects relevant to Parliament. These may include Government & Community, Finance & Economics, Security, Environment, Social Affairs & Members' Support. This in no way implies that specific staff will be confined to working in a particular subject cluster. This may also assist in identifying suitable expertise required by the section in order to provide a service that is relevant to the needs of Parliament. It must be re-iterated that this does not favour specialist staff over generalist staff as it may be argued that every specialist should have the necessary generic skills to perform generalist functions. Researchers and reference/subject librarians will combine their skills as information providers to provide the best possible product to the client.

Benefits of Parliamentary Information Service

- A non-partisan approach to research enables all views on a particular topic to be encapsulated into one document or response. This would empower Members with more information, a broader and better understanding of the topic and thereby influence the quality of debate. At Committee level, such information may assist in building consensus.
- Provides broader, more critical analyses of subjects since papers are not prepared along party political arguments.
- Provides a broad base of information encompassing all views/options that may be used by all Members and party researchers to strengthen their arguments and influence policy along party lines.
- Provides a reliable alternative source of information to that of the executive. Enhances the oversight function of Members and Committees and promotes transparency and democracy.
- Ensures equal access to core information or resources. Empowers Members to participate more fully and confidently in debates.
- Provides technical assistance/expertise. Complicated issues are explained without the additional complications of any political party bias or policy.
- Provides objective assistance in Private Members Bills.
- Provides objective assistance in Committee generated Bills.
- Provides an objective source of information to the institutional structures of Parliament.
- Provides an institutional memory, which is vital for continuity as political climates and Members of Parliament change.

- Raises the standards of research and information provision on a global perspective through links with international Parliamentary research & information structures.
- Develops an African example of good Parliamentary Research and Information Services that may serve as a skilled resource for information and training for other SADC parliaments.
- Fosters a wider spectrum of public input.
- Facilitates a wider network of information sources.

Information Technology

It is intended that through the use of technology, the Information Services Section becomes accessible to Members from their offices through their desktop computers, particularly for purposes of reference requests. The section also plans to publish a newsletter, which may be made available in electronic format and will contain a variety of information including full-text articles on topical issues.

For the Section to be electronically accessible from Members' offices, and to facilitate speedy information exchange between staff of the section, computers would need to be linked via a Local Area Network (LAN). Software packages of all users would also have to be compatible.

Products not specified as confidential by the client may be made available in full-text electronic format by the establishment and maintenance of a Parliamentary Information Services Web-site. This would increase the accessibility of products to all clients within Parliament and would also render products available to Members and researchers in provincial legislatures.

The Information Services Section would be committed to making information more accessible by bringing the service to the client through the use of information technology. To further promote accessibility, particularly for those clients who are uncomfortable with complicated computer technology, information kiosks with user-friendly touch screen facilities could be made available in reading rooms.

Conclusion

The ISS is an established section of the Legislation and Oversight Division. It is obvious that researchers and librarians are undergoing major revisions and opportuniries and are bound to collaborate with each other in the provision of information. To be succesful, we need to put ourselves in the shoes of our clients. This is the situation toward which we are striving.

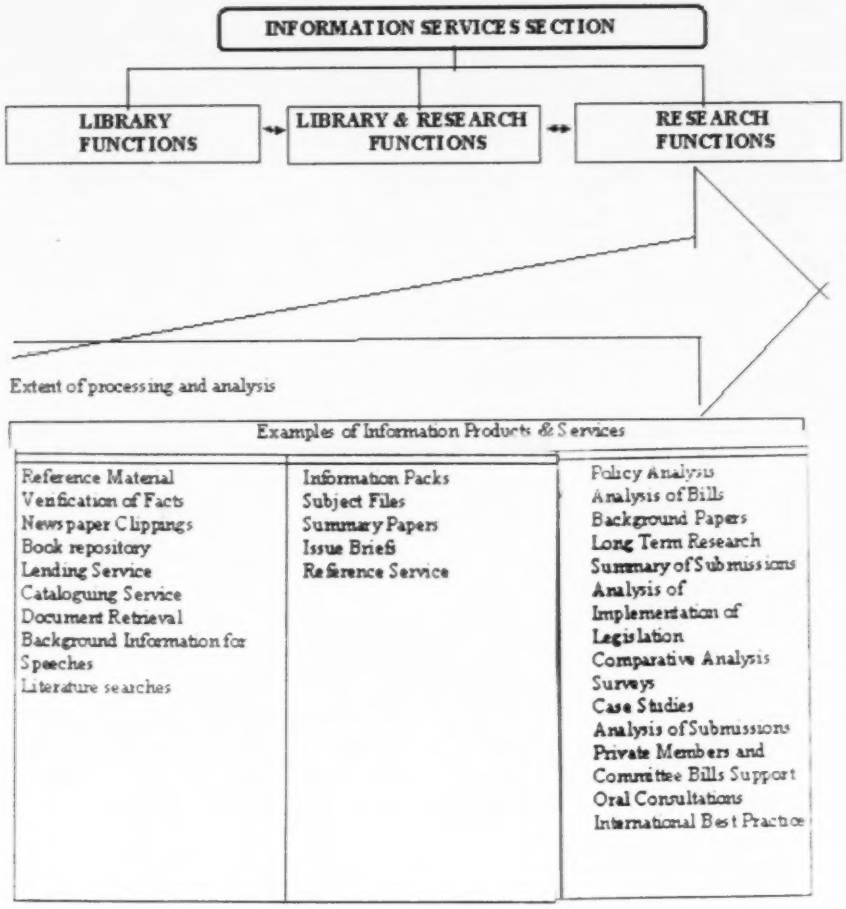

Figure 1. Level of Processing of Information Requests

Figure 2 is not available. Please contact authors.

Figure 2. Organogram

Latest Revision: *September 28, 1999*

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